

**A SLICE OF HISTORY** Did the Tulsa District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers make history, in its own right, in discovering and preserving history?

Yes, according to the Southwestern Division history, published recently to commemorate SWD's 50th anniversary.

The SWD history strips modesty from the Tulsa District's account of its own leadership in the field of archaeology and paints a picture of the Tulsa District leading the field nationally.

The story begins with scattered attempts at archaeological investigations, beginning in the 1930s through the Works Progress Administration. The largely unproductive attempts continued until a band of amateur and professional archaeologists in the Tulsa District created their own team to investigate and preserve, insofar as possible, the significant cultural resources in the Tulsa region. That team's work became a model upon which national legislation and programs were built.

Even as the Corps was building its unprecedented national construction program in the 1930s, resulting in destroying numerous historic sites, the Corps involvement in archaeology was "minimal and perfunctory," writes Dr. D. Clayton Brown in the SWD history.

"Cultural resource management was totally unknown; economic development took precedence over environmental considerations, as it did throughout the United States in both public and private sectors. During World War II, however, this condition changed in the Tulsa District, partly by chance, partly by direction, and perhaps due to the wealth of archaeological sites in Oklahoma."

The District's commitment to cultural preservation was spurred in part by a tragedy that befell Spiro Mounds in southeastern Oklahoma, one of the most significant archaeological sites in North America. This 100-acre site at a bend of the Arkansas River included nine prominent burial mounds containing remains and relics of a priestly hierarchy, class structure, and ceremonial village of the Caddoan Indians, a complex prehistoric society that dates back to around 900 A.D.

The Spiro Mounds were discovered around 1900, in one of the most significant archaeological finds of the 20th century. But in the 1930s, they were plundered and dynamited by a commercial company.

**SOMETHING OLD.** "Perhaps it was the excitement — and tragedy — of Spiro Mounds that first generated an awareness of archaeology within the Tulsa District," Dr. Brown wrote.

Spurred by the personal interest of Col. Chorpene in historic preservation, the Tulsa District took advantage of a narrow window of opportunity when the 1944 Flood Control Act authorized recreation facilities. The District expanded the definition of park to include archaeological sites and lured the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Oklahoma to assign OU's archaeologist to survey Fort Gibson and Tenkiller Ferry sites before construction.

By the end of World War II, the Tulsa District was ripe for archaeological work. The District had one of the largest reservoir workloads in the country and was ready to work on them. Through OU and other professional archaeologists, the District conducted surveys of reservoir sites before they were flooded. In 1946, additional investigations occurred at Wister Lake along Fourche Maline River in southeastern Oklahoma.



**A conch shell effigy from Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma.**

**Searching for the treasures of the past, archaeologists dig at John Redmond, right, and Webbers Falls Lakes. Archaeologist Mike Corkran, center, led amateurs in the Webbers Falls dig.**

